

The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Hasmonean State

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Chapter Three

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Reviewed by Jim West

Eshel's aforementioned (see earlier chapters) careful exegesis continues here, as one would expect, with impressive results. He here examines 4Q379, which he dates to the middle of the first century BCE. He opines that the text suggests that the curse of Joshua is in effect to the author's present and then shows how scholars have applied that curse to almost all of the Hasmonean rulers-identifying them all as the 'man of Belial in question' (p. 69).

Eshel, along with Cross and Yadin, understands that the '... pesher is alluding to events that took place in Jericho. The events, however, were not the assassination of Simeon in 134 BCE but the construction of the Hasmonean estate and winter palace at Jericho during the reign of John Hyrcanus' (p. 75). At this juncture, Eshel supports his case with extensive citations from Josephus and concludes by means of this evidence that 'The writer (of the pesher) was thus arguing with John Hyrcanus' followers [who asserted], that Balaam's prophecy could not possibly refer to John Hyrcanus' (p. 82). 'I suggest that the phrases in this passage were carefully chosen and arranged in a particular order to demonstrate that John Hyrcanus should not be identified as the ideal prophet, the ruler who would crush Moab, nor as the perfect priest who is described in Moses' blessing of Levi' (p. 83). And that '... the pesher was written specifically to be incorporated as the last passage in 4QTest, and that only later was it added to the apocryphal work on Joshua...' (p. 83).

Naturally Eshel could be criticized for seeing things as he does. Since others just as learned and just as well versed in the issues have come to contrary conclusions. But, in my estimation, none is as persuasive as Eshel. His argument, to put it crudely, has far fewer holes in it than do the others with which I am familiar.

Here's his argument in summary: '... the pesher interpreting Josh 6:26 was composed by a scribe of the Qumran sect while writing 4QTest. Later, another scribe, copying the work recounting Joshua's actions, added the sectarian passage to the non-sectarian work he was copying' (p. 85-86). If Eshel and others are correct in dating the pesher to the period of John Hyrcanus's rule, '... the archaeological findings at Jericho also point to the identification of the 'man of Belial' in the pesher to Josh 6:26 with John Hyrcanus' (p. 87) so that 'Joshua's curse of the person who would build Jericho applied to John Hyrcanus' (p. 87).

Eshel brings this chapter to a close with a brief discussion of 4Q339 and its potential connection to Hyrcanus. At this particular point Eshel is not quite as persuasive as he is in the body of the chapter. Indeed, his complaint that the editors of the DJD volume which contains this fragment have taken a 'minimalist' approach (p. 89) seems tendentious. Whether one accepts a reading containing Hyrcanus in line 9 or not, the fact is, the filling of the lacuna is purely speculative.